

My Annual Remembrance- 10/18/2025

As members of the Beirut Veterans of America, we have a sacred duty “to remember” and to pass on to future generations the memory of those who gave their lives for this great country. It is our duty to share our memories, to renew each year our recollections of events now unbelievably 42 years past, and it is up to us to keep alive the names of our brothers who died and to keep a record of events of those dark days.

First Sergeant David L. Battle was one of the Marines who lost his life during the October 23rd, 1983, Beirut bombing. I had the great honor of meeting and working with First Sergeant Battle’s daughter, Amy, and I hope that she will not mind if I once again dedicate this to the memory of her father, a Marine who “Came in Peace” and sacrificed his life that we may all live in peace. God bless and Semper Fi brother, you are not forgotten.

23 October 1983

The morning of the Beirut Bombing, we were sitting at anchor off the coast of Beirut Lebanon. I was a 23-year-old Marine sergeant , serving as a flight deck troubleshooter, on the Iwo Jima’s flight deck as a flight deck troubleshooter. I was an aircraft electrician, I had joined HMM-162, along with my squadron’s four CH-53E helicopters to become a part of the air element of the 24th MAU. It was the first shipboard deployment for the Marine Corps’ latest, and largest cargo helicopter.

Shipboard life, by its very structured boring nature, tends to provide just the right growth medium for me to find trouble. So, it did not take long after dropping anchor off the coast of Beirut, for me and one of the other sergeants to be at each other’s throats and I soon found myself unceremoniously volunteered for the “opportunity” to go ashore to live, and work, at Rock Base with its barbaric two beers a day limit.

“Rock Base”, our squadron’s maintenance site was situated on the tarmac of the Beirut International Airport and nestled between a huge green civilian aircraft hangar, and the bombed out remains of an old building. Just a couple hundred yards directly behind it was located a Lebanese Army training camp, often the target of stray rounds. Up the road, on a slight rise perhaps 500 yards from Rock Base was the Marine barracks where we took our hot meals. Rock Base was, no more than a small tent city, partially draped in camouflage netting. A handful of us lived in large, green, moldy smelling

tents. Each tent was protected by a hastily constructed, knee high, sandbag wall which bordered the perimeter of each tent. The entire tent compound was encompassed by the same type of tiny sandbag wall as well as a row of constantia wire.

The Camp Commandant of Rock Base was a salty old Marine Master Sergeant by the name of Obed Lamar Gandy. "Top" Gandy was also my avionics chief, and my daily schedule was predictable and rarely deviated. During the day I worked on aircraft and worked digging a huge bunker, that would eventually collapse in on itself. At night I tended bar in the squadron's "two beers" a day limit, beer tent. In truth, the two-beer limit was a bit flexible and more of a casual suggestion than a real order. Along with beer, we sold small bags of greasy Lebanese potato chips, and Lebanese drinks, including some horrid tasting, orange flavored, beer like concoction that no one ever seemed to finish. Many of the officers also kept bottles of their favorite expensive liquor which they never shared, and which were stored in a locked steel wall locker, and protected like gold to keep some cunning, unscrupulous, enlisted Marine daring to hazard a taste. Most evenings, our patio, comfortably cool, and draped in camouflage netting, seemed totally out of place, looking more like a scene from Casablanca, than a tiny tent in the middle of a combat zone.

Hot meals were eaten at the Marine Barracks. Many time we were required to wear our heavy flak jackets and steel pots, to go up to chow. We "bitched" about it but we didn't really care. We didn't even think about it much and it rarely occurred to us that extra precautions equated to an enhanced threat of danger. At that point we were still young, stupid, bulletproof Marines, most of whom, at first anyway, found the situation more exciting than dangerous. Soon all that would change.

Nearly every night we watched as the locals, who lived at the base of the mountains in a rundown urban area, that we lovingly referred to as "Hooterville", tried to kill each other with what seemed like an endless supply of tracers, mortars, and rocket fire. We had hot chow, cold beer, a nightly firework show, and best of all, we were not on the ship. We were oblivious to the dangers and how they would soon escalate, and overall, it was an exciting time for a young naive Marine.

Eventually as things in Beirut heated up, the Marine positions became more dangerous and started taking more fire. To be honest, by this point I was

starting to consider myself a lot less bulletproof and I was ready to return to the ship where I had more surrounding me than a canvas tent. Eventually Rock Base started shutting down, leaving only a few of us “essential personnel” until finally the entire compound was shut down, and we were all forced to return to the Iwo Jima.

Aboard ship I worked as a flight deck troubleshooter, launching, and recovering aircraft, and fixing any problem that might prevent them from achieving our exceedingly hectic flight. For me, flight deck troubleshooting provided the perfect opportunity to escape the crowded hell of being below decks. But, despite having what was probably the best possible job I could ask for, even days spent on the flight deck did not completely satiate my desire to get off the ship. I missed the freedom and elbow room afforded me ashore.

I can recall little about the morning of the bombing except that it seemed as if flight quarters had been called away very early. As we started unfolding aircraft and getting them ready the mood strangely went from one of grab ass and joking, to purposeful and business like. None on the flight deck knew yet what was happening ashore but as the atmosphere became serious, and sullen, it quickly became obvious that something major had taken place. Shortly thereafter we began launching flight after flight, and it seemed just as quickly they returned with wounded, only to take off again. As aircraft landed the wounded were quickly ushered, via aircraft elevator, down to the hanger deck, some simply carried on blankets. I, like most others at the time, helped where I could by carrying wounded and trying as best, we could, to comfort them as best we could.

One of my most vivid memories of that day is of kneeling on the hanger deck with a Marine for what seemed like hours, but which I am sure could not have been more than perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. I remember holding his hand, thinking how cold it was, and talking to him despite his being totally unresponsive. I remember he had no real obvious injuries except for one, very neat, and very tiny little hole, right along his hair line and just above his left temple. I remember his skin being paper white, and his eyelids purple, swollen, and bulging. I recall thinking that he did not seem badly hurt, and for a second, I remember thinking to myself that he looked, for all the world, like some sort of frog, and I remember, very clearly the deep feelings of shame and embarrassment that washed over me for having thought such a thing at such an inappropriate time. Two other Marines eventually came and

carried him away without me even learning his name. For the next several hours I moved about the hanger deck in a daze. I helped carry the wounded, and I helped as best I could among the many Marines scattered about the hanger deck. I lost track of that first Marine. Later, I was informed by one of the ship's Corpsmen that the Marine had not survived, having passed away from head trauma.

I can't really recall Top Gandy or Warrant Officer Carradine asking for volunteers to go ashore to help. I do however recall feeling numb, unable to focus, and mostly wanting desperately just to get away from the sadness of the hanger deck, and to get back on shore again. If I had known, at the time, what to expect I would have gladly stayed aboard ship. A short time later a handful us, including the Warrant Officer, flew by CH-46 back to the Beirut International Airport. We landed near a small, abandoned Lebanese hanger at an area designated as LZ Brown. It was inside that hot, dusty, stagnant hanger that I would end up performing what would turn out to be the most horrible, and yet most proud and honorable, duty of my 21 years as an active-duty Marine.

I was soon to find out that the hanger, which was only a short drive from what was left of the Marine Barracks, was the staging point for the remains of those who had been killed in the blast. As vehicle, after vehicle, brought the bodies and what was left of bodies, to the hanger, it was our job to unload them and to place the remains into the cheap, silver, aluminum shipping containers that would eventually be loaded on aircraft for the final flight home. I recall the sadness, the oppressive heat, and the foul smells of mold, dust, bile, blood, and excrement. Smells that to this day, bring images flooding back to me, taking me out of the moment and sending me straight back 42 years ago to Lebanon.

Strangely, what I remember the most was being very proud of the great care that we took with each of our fallen brothers. There were only a few of us, sergeants and below, silently placing each Marine carefully into his box with a respect that only another Marine can appreciate, and with the care that I can only pray other Marines will one day show my own remains. There are no human words that can express the depth of that respect, or the feeling of pride, brotherhood, and kinship, that was shown to those we sent home that day.

I do not remember even a single word being uttered in that dingy, dark

hanger. I am not sure we spoke at all. I can only recall the few of us going about the grim work with professionalism, exactness, and attention to detail one can only expect from a Marine, but showing the unspoken, steadfast devotion, one might only expect from a very close family member. We had never personally known, or for that matter even met, many of the dead, yet there was the deepest of unspoken bonds. Here before us lay our brothers, brothers that were closer in spirit than our own blood kin. Each was treated with the care that one would take with the closest of loved ones, and with a deep respect and pride that I had never seen before that day, and which I have not seen since. Those few somber days were truly unique in their nature, and they represent what I have come to consider the true brotherhood of the warrior culture. They represent the Esprit de Corps that is the very essence of my Marine Corps. It is the very bond that makes all Marines all brothers, it is what will always make me proud to be a member of our cult.

Over the next few days, we would continue our awful task, guard the perimeter, and even help with security when Vice-president George H. W. Bush came to survey the damage. I would eventually return to the Iwo Jima and unlike those who I had met, but who had never met me, I would return alive to the loving arms of my family.

Of all the things I have done, all that I have seen, and all the places I have traveled, it is a few woeful hours, in a hot, dusty, little hanger in Beirut Lebanon that continues to replay, as fresh as the day it happened, inside my head. A single smell or a particular sound sends me into a gloomy feeling of hopelessness that engulfs my every thought. Once it takes hold it is hard to shake, and it takes me out of the moment. My writing helps keep those thoughts at bay, I do not how it works I only know that it does.

This is my tribute, a recollection of a time 42 years ago when we were all stronger, younger, and more naïve about the world. I make no apologies for continuing to post this. Our "First Duty Is to Remember" and for me my writing is cathartic, it helps me more than anything else can, and I will continue to post it until I am no longer able, or until my life membership expires.....

Semper Fi My Brothers,
You Are Not Forgotten

John M. Snyder
GySgt. USMC (Retired)
BVA Life Member 0845
“Our First Duty is to Remember

This Post Is Dedicated to First Sergeant David L. Battle